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SIPDIS

DEPT FOR AF DAS YAMAMOTO, EREDDICK

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SUBJECT: ETHIOPIA: CHARGE PRESSES MFA STATE MINISTER ON DIALOGUE, DETAINEES

Classified By: CHARGE D'AFFAIRES A.I. VICKI HUDDLESTON, FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) and (D).

¶11. (C) SUMMARY: The Charge took advantage of a meeting with State Minister of Foreign Affairs Tekeda Alemu to urge that the GOE to move engage those opposition leaders not imprisoned and prevent further unrest. She called for humanitarian treatment -- and preferably release -- of large numbers of detainees, and fair trials for those not released.

The State Minister agreed that most detainees should be freed more quickly, but argued that the arrest of senior CUD opposition leaders had actually bolstered the democratic process. He expressed his hope that the GOE's detention of CUD leaders would not remain a point of public disagreement with the USG. Tekeda supported bringing remaining CUD leaders into Parliament and the government of Addis Ababa. Discussion on the border crisis with Eritrea and GOE complaints about VOA service are reported via septel. END SUMMARY.

"Helpful" USG Still Concerned about Crackdown

¶12. (C) After accepting Tekeda's expression of gratitude for recent Department of State statements -- which he called were "more helpful than any other country's" -- the Charge pointed out that, while the USG does indeed want to be helpful and balanced, it did have serious concerns about the internal political situation. She said the USG believed that the GOE had mishandled recent demonstration and had "huge concerns" regarding the number and treatment of detainees, especially as many are apparently minors. She said that speedy release of these detainees, many of whom are reported to be underfed and badly sheltered, would do much to lower tension both at home and abroad.

Bringing CUD Into Parliament Still Essential

¶13. (C) The Charge noted that, in terms of working in Parliament, things were going better. The November 14 debate and resolution to create an independent commission of inquiry on recent protests and the GOE response were positive steps, and that she remains hopeful that Parliament will review its rules so that opposition MPs who have joined the body can be effective. She said that continuing such progress is one way to attract the balance of MPs -- members of the "rump" Coalition of Unity and Democracy (CUD) not in detention -- who have not yet taken their seats. She said that word that those leaders are in fact facing harassment by security forces was troubling, and said that as she plans to host a luncheon for them on November 18. The Charge expected that the GOE would permit CUD leaders to attend. She praised the Prime Minister's recent comments that he still hopes to see CUD leaders both in Parliament and taking over the Addis Ababa city administration, and said that more gestures that reinforce that message would be useful.

Detained Leaders Will Remain An Issue

¶14. (C) Finally, she turned to the situation regarding CUD leaders and members of civil society that have been detained, noting widespread international feeling that the latter are in a different category from the former, and that their detention is mystifying. She said that the detention and prosecution of CUD leaders will also continue to be a bone of contention for the GOE, both domestically and internationally, making it hard to press forward on reconciliation.

¶15. (C) Tekeda said that speedier release of the majority of detainees might indeed be in order, but cautioned that "there are criminals among them," and that the GOE was working to find a proper balance between the need to release the innocent with the need to maintain security. Regarding the opposition, the State Minister said that whatever the GOE can do to encourage them to join Parliament and take over the administration of Addis was "in the interest of the ruling party and the country." It was his feeling that the GOE was

prepared to take measures to work with those opposition figures not subject to prosecution.

16. (C) In terms of detained CUD leaders and civil-society activists, however, the State Minister disagreed that their imprisonment endangered Ethiopia's process of democratization. This fact of the matter was "rather the opposite," he said. Tekeda called Addis mayor-elect Berhanu Nega a "tragic figure" who was duped into siding with the hard-liners. He said that Mesfin Woldemariam (seen by many as an elder statesman and pioneer of human-rights advocacy here) "has not contributed an iota to tolerance in this society." The State Minister said he hoped the detention of opposition and civil society leaders "would not be a source of public disagreement," between the USG and GOE, adding that "your clout can stabilize the situation." The Charge closed the meeting by saying that the best way to stabilize the situation would be to ensure a transparent and fair legal process, one that would include access to detainees for family, lawyers, and international organizations. She said that doing so is the GOE's best avenue for reducing tension, especially if, as has it has said, the GOE in fact has hard evidence against those it intends to prosecute.

HUDDLESTON